

Overall Class Objective: To gain biblical perspective on the problem of evil for the purpose of strengthening personal faith and equipping believers to answer concerns of unbelievers.

#### Class Overview\*

1. Clarify the categorization of the nature of evil
2. Understand the issues and scope of the problem of evil
3. Identify the biblical constraints regarding the problem of evil
4. Explore the two primary approaches to the problem of evil
5. Consider the various theories of theodicy
6. Describe the concept of inscrutability as applied to the problem of evil
7. Reflect on the biblical example of the greater good theodicy
8. Explain the licensing and limiting controls of greater good theodicy in the Bible
9. Delineate what the work of Christ teaches about the problem of evil
10. Note how eschatological events of the Bible give perspective to the problem of evil

\*Acknowledgement: The general structure of this class is adapted from an essay by Greg Welty entitled, The Problem of Evil. This class is based on the belief that the Bible is true and accurate in what it says about God and the world.

#### Notes

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#### VI. Arguments for a “greater good theodicy”

A. A suggested argument for a “greater good theodicy” can be formulated on three themes by combining both theodicy (reasons God may have for using evil) and inscrutability (limits on our ability to perceive his reasons).

1. God aims at great good (either for himself, or mankind, or both)
2. God often intends this great good to come about by way of evil means.
3. God sometimes leaves people unaware regarding the good he is seeking or how the good depends upon the use of evil.

B. Three biblical case studies.

1. The case of **Job**

a) God aims at great good.

(1) God intends to show his worthiness to be worshipped for who he is not just for material blessings he gives (Job 1:11; 2:5).

b) God often intends this great good to come about by way of various evils.

(1) To accomplish his goal God uses a combination of moral evil and natural evil (Job 1:15, 16, 17, 19, 21-22; 2:7, 10; 42:11).

c) God leaves created persons unaware regarding the good he is seeking.

(1) Job is left unaware regarding what God is doing, Job has no access to the story's prologue in chapter 1. And when God speaks to him "out of the whirlwind" he never reveals to Job why he suffered.

(2) Job's ignorance of the whole spectrum of created reality is exposed (Job 40:6; 41:34), and Job confesses his ignorance of both creation and providence (Job 40:3-5; 42:1-6).

## 2. The case of **Joseph**

a) God aims at great good.

(1) God planned to save the broader Mediterranean world from a famine while preserving his people (Gen. 45:5-7) and (ultimately) bringing a Redeemer into the world descended from these Israelites (Matt. 1:1-17; Luke 3:23-38).

b) God often intends this great good to come about by way of various evils.

(1) God uses the means of various evils (Ps. 105:16-17), including Joseph's betrayal, being sold into slavery, and suffering unjust accusation and imprisonment (Gen. 37-39). Joseph sees these evils as the means of God's sovereign providence (Gen. 45:8; 50:20).

(a) As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. Genesis 50:20

c) God leaves created persons unaware regarding the good he is seeking.

(1) God leaves Joseph's brothers (Gen. 45:5), the Midianite traders, Potiphar's wife, and the cupbearer in the dark. None of these people knew the role their blameworthy actions would play in preserving God's people in a time of danger. They had no clue which good depended on which evils, or that the evils would even work toward any good at all.

## 3. The case of **Jesus**

a) God aims at great good.

(1) God aims to exalt his glory by redeeming his people through the atonement of Christ and by displaying his justice, love, grace, mercy, wisdom, and power.

b) God often intends this great good to come about by way of various evils.

(1) God uses Jewish plots (Matt. 26:3-4, 14-15), Satan's promptings (John 13:21-30), Judas's betrayal (Matt 26:47-56; 27:3-10; Luke 22:22), Roman injustice (Matt. 26:57-68), Pilate's cowardice (Matt. 27:15—26), and the soldiers' brutality (Matt. 27:27-44) to bring about the atoning work of Jesus.

c) God leaves created persons unaware regarding the good he is seeking.

(1) But God leaves various created agents (human and demonic) unaware of their part in bringing about God's saving work in Jesus. It is clear that the Jewish leaders, Satan, Judas, Pilate, and the soldiers are all ignorant of the role they play in fulfilling the divinely prophesied, redemptive purpose in the cross of Christ (Acts 2:23; 3:18; 4:25-29; John 13:18; 17:12; 19:23-24).

(a) <sup>22</sup> "Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know— <sup>23</sup> this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. Acts 2:22, 23

(b) <sup>27</sup> for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, <sup>28</sup> to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. Acts 4:27, 28

C. Thus, the Bible seems to strongly suggest that the GGT (God's aiming at great good by way of various evils) is in fact his modus operandi in providence, his "way of working." But this GGT is tempered by a good dose of divine inscrutability (human creatures unaware of God's intent in the use of any given evil).

## VII. Licensing and Limiting the GGT

A. In each narrative above, the first two themes highlight the way of theodicy (God aiming at great good by way of evils), while the third theme highlights the way of inscrutability (left to ourselves, we cannot discern what God's reasons are for any case of evil).

1. By way of the first two themes Scripture repeatedly encourages the view that God has a justifying reason for permitting the evils of the world. That is what's right with the way of theodicy.

2. But Scripture, by way of the third theme, repeatedly discourages the view that we can ever know what that reason is in any particular case of evil. That is what's right with the way of inscrutability.

3. In contemporary philosophy, these are usually presented as two different ways to solve the problem of evil (theodicy and inscrutability). However, the Bible seems to combine these two ways when it speaks of God's relation to the evils in the world. That is, it licenses the greater good theodicy as an overall perspective on evil, but wisely limits that perspective in a way that is instructive for both Christians and non-Christians.

B. God's Sovereignty over **Natural** Evil

1. It is one thing to acknowledge God's sovereign and purposeful providence over the moral and natural evils mentioned in the Job, Joseph, and Jesus narratives. It is quite another to claim that God is sovereign over all moral and natural evils. But this is what the Bible repeatedly teaches. This takes us a considerable way towards licensing the GGT as a general approach to the problem of evil. The Bible presents multitudes of examples of God intentionally bringing about natural evils rather than being someone who merely permits nature to 'do its thing' on its own. For example:

2. Famine (Deut. 32:23-24; 2 Kgs. 8:1; Ps. 105:16; Isa. 3:1; Ezek. 4:16; 5:16-17; 14:13; 14:21; Hos. 2:9; Amos 4:6, 9; Hag. 2:17)
3. Drought (Deut. 28:22; 1 Kgs. 8:35; Is. 3:1; Hos. 2:3; Amos 4:6-8; Hag. 1:11)
4. Rampaging wild animals (Lev. 26:22; Num. 21:6; Deut. 32:23-24; 2 Kgs. 17:25; Jer. 8:17; Ezek. 5:17; 14:15; 14:21; 33:27)
5. Disease (Lev. 26:16-25; Num. 14:12; Deut. 28:21-22 28:27; 2 Kgs. 15:5; 2 Chron. 21:14; 26:19-20)
6. Birth defects such as blindness and deafness (Exod. 4:11; John 9:1-3)
7. Death itself (Deut. 32:39; 1 Sam. 2:6-7)
8. Ten Egyptian plagues (Exod. 7:14-24; 8:1-15; 8:16-19; 8:20-32; 9:1-7; 9:8-12; 9:13-35; 10:1-20; 10:21-29; 11:4-10; 12:12-13; 12:27-30)
9. 'Impersonal' forces and objects (Ps. 65:9-11; 77:18; 83:13-15; 97:4; 104:4; 104:10-24; 107:25; 29; 135:6-7; 147:8; 147:16-18; 148:7-8; Jonah 1:4; Nah. 1:3-4 Zech. 7:14 Matt. 5:45 Acts 14:17)

C. God's Sovereignty over **Moral** Evil

1. In addition, and perhaps surprisingly, the Bible presents God as having such meticulous control over the course of human history that a wide range of moral evils — murder, adultery, disobedience to parents, rejecting wise counsel, even human hatred — can be regarded as "of the Lord." Without erasing or suppressing the intentionality of creatures — and this includes their deliberations, their reasoning, their choosing between alternatives they consider and reflect upon — God's own intentionality stands above and behind the responsible choices of his creatures. For example:

2. Eli's sons' disobedience (1 Sam. 2:23-25)
3. Samson's desire for a foreign wife (Judg. 14:1-4)
4. Absalom, Rehoboam, and Amaziah rejecting wise counsel (2 Sam. 17:14; 1 Kgs. 12:15; 2 Chron. 25:20)
5. Assassination (2 Chron. 22:7, 9; 32:21-22)
6. Adultery (2 Sam. 12:11-12; 16:22)
7. Human hatred (Ps. 105:23-25; Exod. 4:21; Deut. 2:30, 32; Josh. 11:20; 1 Kgs. 11:23, 25; 2 Chron. 21:16-17)